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Review Essay

Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam

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Christian C. Lentz. *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. 352 pp.

The Battle of Điện Biên Phủ is one of the most important *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) of the contemporary Vietnamese nation-state, and, beyond that, of the anticolonial struggle in Asia and Africa. Its end on May 7, 1954 signified a resounding military victory of a colonized people against the French after the Second World War. As such, the battle anticipates the later victory of the Communist North over South Vietnam and its American allies. The siege of the French troops at Điện Biên Phủ and their surrender was not only a feat of military strategy but also a lesson for a future of warfare that followed the creation of the seventeenth-parallel division that has served as the practical political boundary between North and South Vietnam.

The danger of a *lieu de mémoire* is that it is lifted to a symbolic position outside history and geography. In his thoroughly researched book, *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*, Christian C. Lentz returns the battle site to its historical geography, especially the making of Northwest Vietnam. Điện Biên Phủ was an insignificant place in a vast, sparsely populated, mountainous area, where the majority people were Tai, while the Kinh or Viet, the majority ethnicity in emerging Vietnam, were an insignificant minority of 1 percent. The Tai were ethnically closer to the population of Thailand than to the Kinh-Vietnamese. Lentz has a rich understanding of the complexity of spatial understandings among the Black River people that preceded the formation of nation-states and, to an important extent, continues today. He pays special attention to the concept of *muang*, which organized highland communities in political and economic terms. The author is equally aware of the difficulties of working with fixed categories of ethnicity and with the state projects, in both China and Vietnam, that created them. The defeat of the Japanese enabled a hereditary Tai elite to rule several *muang* in a confederation that allied itself with the French after their return. The aim of the Vietnamese "people's war" was to fight these elites and win some of them over. Lentz shows the success of their efforts by looking at the biography of one Tai leader who became a national hero in Vietnam. A major element of the struggle was to "win the hearts" of the people by battling famine—an immense task, because the

armies themselves had to be fed, partly from local sources. In fact, the French were defeated because they could access supplies only by air. Lentz provides rich details of the logistics of the “people’s war,” a conflict that depended on a newly acquired understanding of terrain and peoples that became essential in the incorporation of this area into Vietnam.

Although the book is primarily an archival study based on Vietnamese and French sources, Lentz complements formal study with fieldwork in the area. He is mainly interested in the political economy of cultivation and labor but also, especially in the final chapter about millenarian resistance, the significance of cultural perceptions of the ethnic actors in the area becomes clear. A couple of years after the victory at Điện Biên Phủ, the unusual appearance of locusts and local tales of vampires spurred a millenarian movement known as “Calling for a King.” The movement—with its Hmong, Dao, and Khmu adherents—quit the developmentalist agenda of the Vietnamese and awaited the coming of a just king to get rid of the dominance of the Tai and Kinh. (Here, the anthropologist would have loved to read more about ethnic relations and perceptions in the area, and about religious differences.) The state responded with force, but Lentz insightfully shows that it also offered its own brand of millenarianism, a socialist Vietnam.

Lentz’s book is a great contribution to the history of the conflicted making of Vietnam, a history that is more often than not hidden in official Vietnamese historiography.

About the Reviewer

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